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ECA FOR MICELA IOVINE

SUBJECT: Government of Armenia Considering Full Scholarships for  
Students of "Top Schools" Abroad

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Summary  
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¶1. Summary: In summer 2008, the Prime Minister's office announced a proposal for a scholarship program offering funding to Armenian citizens and Diaspora Armenians for university studies abroad. The program, still in its nascent stages, encompasses a potentially wide range of scholarship opportunities at the most prominent and competitive universities in the world. U.S, Russian and European universities are included in the list. The strategy paper also recommends the development of "AR-Net," an alumni and youth leadership association. Funding for the program is proposed as a public-private partnership between the GOAM, NGOs and individual donors, and is to be administered by a private fund. Debate on the program is set for this year and requires further development and input from various sectors. End summary.

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Seeing the Light  
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¶2. In June 2008, the Prime Minister's office announced the development of a strategy paper entitled "Supporting Armenian Citizens and Diaspora Armenians Studying at Advanced Universities and Science and Education Centers of the World." The paper was based on the assumption that Armenia's strength lies in its intellectual potential. This language echoes sentiments often publically expressed by Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian (Reftel), who has pointed to the important role Armenian education has played in maintaining national identity, bringing economic progress, and forging cultural unity. The paper, also called the "Light Program" is a grassroots initiative based on the Prime Minister's discussions with university students, academics, and intellectuals, and was developed by Artur Ishkhanyan, a member of the National Academy of Sciences. Ishkhanyan presented the "Light Program" to the President's Office in December 2007. The project has been endorsed by all relevant ministries.

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Financing the Future - From Student to Alumnus  
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¶3. The 6-page document outlines the GOAM's desire to encourage Armenians to study at the world's top schools at the undergraduate through post-doctoral levels by providing them with generous funding for the duration of their studies. Funding is to include tuition, room and board, training materials, medical insurance, workshop funds, professional development expenses, travel to Armenia up to two times per year, funding for educational and cultural activities in Armenia, funding for research initiatives, and monies for organizing events with an Armenian content while abroad. There are no restrictions on specialties or majors. Scholarship applications for all post-high school academic programs are to be accepted on a rolling basis, and a decision is to be made on an application within 30 calendar days. Emphasis is on Armenia's youth. No one over 40 is eligible for a scholarship.

¶4. The proposed list ranking foreign educational institutions includes the "top 15 educational institutions" from the U.S., Russia, and Europe, along with other educational institutions with high ranking specialties from those three mentioned regions. For the U.S., the GOAM proposes to use the rankings provided by U.S. News & World Report. In the case of Russia, the Russian Federal Agency of Education rankings will be used. For Europe, the Times

Higher Education rankings will be employed. In the event that different lists suggest stronger specialties at divergent schools, the paper states that the European rankings will prevail. No universities outside of the U.S., Russia or Europe are currently under consideration.

15. The program is wide-ranging in scope, and also includes the intention to maintain contacts with active alumni in professional fields. The paper also includes the establishment of "AR-Net," a network of "highly qualified, forward-looking leaders" who will "strengthen pro-Armenian thinking" and conduct classroom courses, promote new media outreach, staff an information center, encourage professional development, assist with strategic education planning, and organize leadership seminars.

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Sources of Funding  
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16. Funding for the program is proposed as a public - private partnership between the GOAM, NGOs and individual donors. The paper notes that NGOs and private individuals may provide financing for specific studies and have their names reflected in the scholarship, provided that the programs occur at a top university. The scholarship program is to be administered by the "Luys" (Light) Private Fund which, while nominally independent, "operates actively in the foreign policy of the GOAM in the area of science and education." While not yet officially announced, according to Iskhanyan, the head of the fund's Board of Trustees will be President Sargsian. The Prime Minister is also a member of the board. Other board members are yet to be determined.

17. This fund would also develop a long-term action plan in conjunction with stakeholder groups, including the GOAM. Revenues for the fund would be generated through allocations from the national budget, NGO and private donations, and other miscellaneous sources of funding. According to Iskhanyan, there has already been a state allocation of 54 million dram to the fund. Over forty NGOs, private organizations/companies and individuals have reportedly committed to donate funds to the project. The fund would carry out scholarship competitions, identify qualified youth, and establish agreements with foreign educational institutions "with high ranking" in order to solidify the program.

18. The initiative is awaiting Cabinet approval. If it is not approved, another cycle of debate on the proposed scholarship program is expected over the next year. The Ministry of Education, which did not provide extensive input into the original proposal, has expressed interest in providing counsel. How many students might participate in the program, what the overall budget will be, and how the board of directors will operate will be examined by the Cabinet and a future board. (Note: We hope to provide input into the school selection process, and to secure as many U.S. schools on the list as possible. A determining factor will be the level of student interest and acceptance rates from U.S. universities. The Embassy Public Affairs Section is also considering how the establishment of a Fulbright Commission and student program for Armenian citizens could potentially be incorporated into the proposal. A Fulbright student program for Armenians does not currently exist and, while it would not be limited to 15 universities, may be feasible with GOAM partner funding after further discussions. End note).

Yovanovitch